

South Downs Way Guided Trail

Trip style: Guided trails

Destination: 📍 South Downs

Trip code: ABW11-LSD01

Grades: 1, 3



HOLIDAY OVERVIEW

We love walks along the South Downs Way. Follow this challenging 100-mile route from the former Saxon capital of Winchester to the Edwardian seaside resort of Eastbourne and Beachy Head. Discover fascinating Bronze Age archaeological sites and enjoy glorious views over the English Channel on the coastal sections above the Seven Sisters – the wall of gleaming white sea cliffs that welcomes visitors to what's fondly known as the Gateway to England.

WHAT YOU'LL LOVE

- Admiring panoramic views over the coast and the Weald
- Gazing over the Devil's Dyke
- Discovering Iron Age forts
- Spending a day walking along the Seven Sisters cliffs to Beachy Head
- Walking the entire South Downs Way

WHAT'S INCLUDED

- Comfortable en-suite rooms in our country house
- Cream tea on arrival day
- Cooked or continental breakfast every morning
- Daily packed lunches
- Three-course evening meals, plus tea & coffee
- Guided walks with an experienced HF Holidays Leader
- All transport to and from walks where necessary

TRIP SUITABILITY

This Guided Walking/Hiking Trail is graded 3 which involves walks/hikes on generally good paths and tracks, but there are some sections over rough and/or steep terrain. You will require a good level of fitness as there will be some long walking days and, except for day 7, you will be walking an average of 11½ miles (18.5 km) with 1,400 feet (430 m) of ascent every day of your holiday. It is your responsibility to ensure you have the relevant fitness and equipment required to join this holiday. The Downs landscape is open and exposed to the elements. Although situated in the relatively mild south of England, it can be windy and cold.

Your fitness

We want you to be confident that you can meet the demands of each walking day and get the most out of your holiday. Please be sure you can manage the distance and ascent detailed in the daily itineraries. It is important for your own enjoyment, and that of your fellow guests that you can maintain the pace.

It makes a lot of sense to spend time getting some additional exercise before your holiday. We suggest that you try to fit in several longer walks, including some on hilly terrain. Other exercises such as cycling, jogging and swimming are also excellent for developing increased stamina.

ITINERARY

Day 1: Arrival Day

Check-in at the hotel is available from 16:00. If you are a member you can arrive at the house from 14:00. Enjoy a complimentary cream tea at 16:30 and meet other guests.

Day 2: Winchester to Exton

We commence our journey at the Mill House, the official starting point of the SDW in Winchester, initially following the River Itchen before leaving the city and crossing fields to Chilcomb village. Sadly, there is insufficient time to explore Winchester. Leaving Chilcomb, we ascend our first summit, Telegraph Hill, from where there are good views to Winchester and over the natural amphitheatre below Cheesefoot Head. As the views begin to open up to the south, we meander across rolling countryside of mixed woodlands and arable lands passing Mill Barrows and the lost medieval village of Lomer. Nearing Beacon Hill, we gain a view over the Meon valley, before descending to the village of Exton. 12½ miles (20.5km) with 1,170 feet (360m) of ascent and 1,100 feet (330m) of descent.

Day 3: Exton to Queen Elizabeth Forest

From the village of Exton, we cross the River Meon and continue east to ascend Old Winchester Hill, a national nature reserve topped by an Iron Age fort and a Bronze Age cemetery. The strategic importance of this site is self-evident and the views are inspiring. We descend over open rolling downland with superb views, then on to Wether Down. From here the Downs begin as a ridge, stretching to the coast at Eastbourne and pierced by river valleys and roads. We now begin to experience the chalk ridge landscape of the Downs as we approach Butser Hill (883ft: 270m), the highest point on the South Downs and formerly the starting point of the SDW. It is well-regarded for its butterfly populations, including the Chalkhill Blue. Having admired the views, we descend to the Queen Elizabeth Country Park for refreshment. 11 miles (17½km) with 1,370 feet (420m) of ascent and 1,120 feet (340m) of descent.

Day 4: Queen Elizabeth Forest to Cocking

Continuing eastwards, we see more forested landscape on the gentler southern slopes of the Downs. At Hundred Acres we cross over the county border from Hampshire into Sussex and continue along Forty Acre Lane to Harting Downs. Our next ascent takes us around (our second) Beacon Hill, the site of an Iron Age fort, and onto Pen Hill. We soon pass the Devil's Jumps, a curious group of large tumuli. Some pleasant downland ridge walking rounds off our day as we traverse Cocking Down to our pickup point on the A286. 13 miles (21km) with 1,830 feet (560m) of ascent and 1,930 feet (590m) of descent.

Day 5: Cocking to Amberley

At the start of the day we ascend back onto the ridge and passing Heyshott Down archaeological site, a group of Bronze Age burial mounds, we enter the woodlands of Charlton Forest. We continue to Graffham Down before passing to the north of the highest point of the Sussex Downs, Crown Tegleaze (830ft: 253m), covered by woodland. Further east, having crossed the A285, we ascend Bignor Hill (736ft: 225m). The nearby Roman Villa, a large excavated Roman house with extensive, coloured mosaics and Roman road (Stane Street) are evidence of Roman occupation. The road was constructed in 50 AD to connect London to the port at Chichester (Naviomagus) whose

cathedral can be seen to the south-west. We now descend from the Downs to the floodplain of the tidal River Arun which we cross to reach Amberley and refreshment. 11½ miles (18.5km) with 1,250 feet (380m) of ascent and 1,570 feet (480m) of descent.

Day 6: Amberley to Botolphs

Starting with a relatively steep ascent back onto the ridge of the Downs, we reach the summit of Rackham Hill with views over the flood plain of Amberley Wild Brooks, site of an RSPB reserve. Beyond here we experience undulating, ridge-top walking with fine views. Descending to cross the A24 (London to Worthing) by footbridge into Washington village, we ascend back to the ridge to reach Chanctonbury Ring, a site famous for both the Iron Age fort and its clump of beech trees. The site offers a panoramic view, including to Cissbury Ring, just a few miles to the south. We progress over a mixed landscape of arable and pasture lands with wooded slopes below. The tops of the Downs themselves are on the whole bare and give a feeling of isolation. Passing Steyning Bowl and, for a short distance joining the Monarch's Way, we make our way to the River Adur and our pick up just south of Upper Beeding. 14½ miles (23.5km) with 1,570 feet (480m) of ascent and 1,600 feet (490m) of descent.

Day 7: Botolphs to Ditchling Beacon

We first have a gradual ascent to reach the ridge top near Truleigh Hill (706ft: 216m) and continue to the spectacular, and popular, landmark of Devil's Dyke, a Victorian leisure centre. Through a mixed arable landscape, we descend to cross another busy route through the Downs (A23 London to Brighton) to reach Pyecombe church with its unusual Tapsell gate. Ascending back on to the ridge through Pyecombe golf course, we can make a short detour to reach the Clayton Windmills (Jack & Jill), before heading on to another famous landmark, Ditchling Beacon (811ft: 248m): the third highest point on the South Downs. 10 miles (16.5km) with 1,860 feet (570m) of ascent and 1,140 feet (350m) of descent.

Day 8: Rest Day

A day without any scheduled walks, providing the opportunity to relax, explore the local area independently or enjoy Abingworth Hall's facilities: heated outdoor swimming pool, putting green and croquet lawn. Discover more about Abingworth Hall and the local area for ideas on how to enjoy your free day.

Day 9: Ditchling Beacon to Southease

We continue along the ridge of the Downs until, just before the summit of Blackcap, our route turns south across open downland and descending to cross the A27 Lewes road. A gradual ascent, partly along Juggs Road (an ancient route), takes us back on to the Downs. At White Way, another old route into Lewes, we pass from the western to the eastern hemisphere as we cross the Greenwich Meridian. Descending into the Ouse valley, we pass through the village of Southease. Rodmell, once the home of Virginia Woolf, is just up the valley. Much of this area became famous having been frequented by the artists and writers of the unconventional bohemian 'Bloomsbury Group' in the early part of the last century. After crossing the River Ouse, we reach our destination for the day. 12 miles (19.5km) with 1,040 feet (320m) of ascent and 1,750 feet (530m) of descent.

Day 10: Southease to Exceat

Starting from the Ouse valley, we ascend Itford Hill, but the effort is rewarded by several miles of open ridge-top walking with accompanying views. Firlie Beacon (710ft: 217m) provides one of the finest panoramic views from the Downs. We next follow a chalk track that used to be a sheep drove road, and descend into Alfriston. The Old Clergy House is one of the first buildings to have been owned by the National Trust. After crossing the River Cuckmere, we turn south, following the valley seawards, meandering past Litlington and West Dean to reach Exceat and its tea rooms for refreshment. 10 miles (16km) with 1,310 feet (400m) of ascent and 1,310 feet (400m) of descent.

Day 11: Exceat to Eastbourne

From Exceat, we gradually ascend the Downs beside the classic meanders of the River Cuckmere to reach the first of the Seven Sisters. Our cliff top route takes us along the switchback of the 'bottoms' and 'brows' of this popular section of the South Downs Way to reach Birling Gap – the site of continuous and dramatic coastal erosion, and the NT café. Continuing along the cliff top path, we pass the old lighthouse at Belle Tout to reach Beachy Head. The cliffs here are 530ft (160m) high and tower over the famous 'candy stick' Beachy Head lighthouse on the rocks below. A gentle descent takes us to the outskirts of Eastbourne and the end of our journey. Following our promenade to the pier, we can deservedly reward ourselves with celebratory refreshment. 9 miles (14.5km) with 1,550 feet (470m) of ascent and 1,550 feet (470m) of descent.

Day 12: Departure Day

Enjoy a leisurely breakfast before making your way home.

Abingworth Hall

Country living just got cosier at this former farmhouse. Abingworth Hall is just a skip away from the village of Thakeham at the foot of the South Downs – a landscape of ancient woodland, hidden valleys, chalky cliffs, and high-backed hills so deserving of its national park status finally bestowed in 2010. While the views from the doorstep are as wow-worthy as you'd expect, the walking opportunities around the sightseeing greats such as Devil's Dyke, Seven Sisters Country Park, Kingley Vale, Parham House, and the Clayton Windmills (known locally as Jack and Jill) are equally standout. You'll also be within easy driving distance of several historic towns and cities, most fabulously Arundel, Chichester, and Brighton.

A warm welcome

We want you to feel comfortable from the moment you arrive. You'll find a welcome pack in your room with guest registration forms, menus, order forms for dinners and picnic lunches, the Wi-Fi password, and the front door code. Our houses are locked at night, so we recommend noting the Duty Manager's number on arrival in case of an emergency (or getting locked out).

Evening entertainment

While evening entertainment varies from house to house, HF Holidays Inter-House Quiz night held after dinner on Wednesdays is a weekly staple. Your HF Holidays leader may be around for tips on guided and self-guided walking routes as well as visit-worthy local attractions.

Walks talks

Our HF Holidays walk leaders host guided walking information briefings before dinner on guided walking holiday arrival days. This is followed by a group Walks Talk for information on the following day's guided walks (held before dinner every evening). Self-guided walking guests are, of course, welcome.

The walking day

Prior to setting off on guided walks, your HF Holidays Leader will run you through a short safety briefing. There's also an up-to-date weather forecast on display at the house to ensure you have appropriate clothing and footwear. If you choose to do your own walks or are on a self-guided walking holiday, we ask that you please complete an Independent Walker Card each day. These can be found near the Discovery Point in the house.